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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE US AND INDIA: TOWARDS A *DE FACTO* 'STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP'

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Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, an increasingly close alignment has developed between the United States and the Republic of India. This was evident during President Clinton's historic visit to India in March of 2000 (the first since the Carter Administration) and only two years after the 1998 nuclear weapons tests by India and Pakistan. This momentum has increased with the inauguration of the Bush Administration and the new post-9/11 international security environment.

This growing relationship promises to impact not only South Asia, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the evolving security order in East Asia. In the South Asian context, it is clear that Pakistan would be acutely affected by any US-India entente. In the East Asian context, the US-India alignment could significantly impact the prickly Sino-American relationship. In effect, this alignment could be seen by Chinese leaders as a component of an incipient US containment strategy. This paper seeks to shed some light on these developments by explaining and clarifying the recent and growing alignment between the US and India in the post-Cold War period.

The Historical Context

Relations between the two giant democracies have been far from ideal. To be sure, the US did see India as a potential bulwark against both Soviet and Chinese expansionism in South Asia during the early stages of the Cold War. This led the United States not only to offer covert assistance to the guerilla resistance movement in Chinese-occupied Tibet in the 1950s (where Indian territory was used as a basing area for covert operations), but also to align itself with India during its brief but bloody 1962 border war with China.[1]

However, American support for India was gradually withdrawn as New Delhi shifted its strategic axis at the time of its 1971 war with Pakistan. Secure in his knowledge of China's close political and military support, General Yahya Khan of Pakistan began a pacification campaign against domestic opponents in East Pakistan. When millions of refugees began streaming into India, New Delhi saw no alternative but to send its military forces into East Pakistan (which subsequently became the independent state of Bangladesh). Of course, in doing so, India risked the intervention of Chinese forces to its northeast. Rather than relying on a friendly if tenuous relationship with the US, India signed the 1971 Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty, which would provide security guarantees against possible Chinese intervention. This treaty led the US to openly side with Pakistan. As a result, the US deployed a significant naval task force (Task Group 74, centered around the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise*) into the Bay of Bengal, primarily to act as a warning to both Indian and Soviet leaders.

This estrangement continued into the 1980s, largely due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Reagan Administration's determination to use Pakistan as a staging ground for the *mujahideen* proxy war against the Red Army. That being said, this period did see the gradual American acceptance of Indian hegemony in South Asia. This hegemony was clearly reflected in the Indian intervention that led to the state of Bangladesh (1971), the Simla Pact between India and Pakistan (which contained references on the need to bilaterally solve the Kashmir dispute), the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka (1987-1990) and during the Maldives coup (1988).

Evidence of this slight warming of relations was manifest in the improvement in economic and trade relations between India and the US, as well as in increased defence cooperation and technology transfers. In a letter to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, President Reagan seemed to indicate his acceptance of Indian hegemony on the subcontinent. In the context of the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, the letter states that the President was: "impressed by your willingness to restore order without unnecessary bloodshed. I have no doubt that your action will be remembered as a valuable contribution to regional stability".[2] However, efforts to forge closer relations would have to wait. The imperatives of the Afghan proxy war ensured that Washington devoted more attention to relations with Pakistan. This was not intended to alienate India. But in the context of the Cold War, it was seen as a strategic necessity.

Non-Proliferation and Cooperation

The end of the Cold War saw a continuation of the ambiguous relationship between the US and India. Two developments in the early to mid-1990s reinforced this state of affairs. The Clinton Administration's decision to focus on non-proliferation as a cornerstone of American foreign policy created friction with New Delhi, which viewed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as discriminatory towards non-nuclear states.[3] But while pressure was placed on the Indian nuclear weapons program, America's stance also necessitated that pressure be exerted on Pakistan's covert nuclear weapons program.[4]

These Indo-American tensions were mitigated somewhat by limited military cooperation in 1992, 1995, and 1996 in the form of the joint naval exercises (Malabar I, II, and III) in the Indian Ocean. A Defense Policy Group (DPG) was established in order to deal with these new military-to-military relations. Thus while relations were slowly improving in the early to mid-1990s, the issue of non-proliferation created a significant hurdle to full rapprochement.

The tension between these two developments temporarily ended on 11-13 May, 1998 when India conducted a total of five underground nuclear tests. This forced President Clinton to impose sanctions, as mandated by Section 102 of the Arms Export Control Act. Some effects of these sanctions included: termination of $21-million in FY 1998 economic development assistance; postponement of $1.7-billion in lending by the International Financial Institutions (IFI), as supported by the Group of Eight (G-8) leading industrial nations; prohibition on loans or credit from US banks to the government of India; and termination of Foreign Military Sales under the Arms Export Control Act.[5] From India's perspective, an even more worrisome development was the release of the Sino-US Presidential Joint Statement on South Asia on 27 June, 1998. This not only called for India and Pakistan to enter immediately and unconditionally into the CTBT, but also gave the United States and China responsibility for the "maintenance of peace, stability and security in the region".[6] Naval exercises were subsequently cancelled and the incipient DPG frozen.

Unbeknownst to many observers at the time, the 1998 nuclear tests and resulting sanctions did not herald the birth of non-proliferation as a chief US policy concern. Rather, the tests spelled its end—at least as far as South Asia was concerned. Relations between the US and India, which reached a low point immediately after the tests, soon improved. The 1999 Kargil border conflict between India and Pakistan saw the US openly side with India.[7] Deputy US Secretary of State Strobe Talbott traveled to India, a move which led to a series of meetings with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh on issues such as nuclear proliferation and India-Pakistan relations. This culminated in President Clinton's historic March, 2000 visit to India. On that occasion, President Clinton and Prime Minister Vajpayee signed a joint bilateral statement entitled *US-India Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century*. The 'agreed principles' of that statement included:

- regular India-US 'summit' meetings;
- an annual foreign policy dialogue between the Secretary of State and the Minister for External Affairs;
- the continuation of the ongoing Dialogue on Security and Non-Proliferation between the Deputy Secretary of State and the External Affairs Minister;
- the Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism would continue to meet regularly;
- the institutionalization of a bilateral economic dialogue;
- the creation of a Joint Consultative Group on Clean Energy and Environment and the setting up of the US-India Science and Technology Forum.[8]

In addition, the US seemed to have explicitly sided with India on the thorny question of who should have sovereignty over the disputed province of Kashmir. On economic matters, promises of $2-billion worth of commercial agreements and $1-billion in US Export/Import financing were also made.

While these developments signified the growing alignment between the two countries, one can notice the omission of defence matters from the 'agreed principles'. The informal accord failed to provide for defence exchanges between the two militaries, while the dialogues on security and non-proliferation were to be handled by the two foreign ministries.[9]

The New Strategic Re-Alignment

The Bush Administration has dramatically increased the momentum of this strategic alignment by incorporating a greater degree of security and defence cooperation into the mix. The importance of India to US national security planning in evident in the appointment of Robert Blackwill as the US ambassador to New Delhi. Blackwill is a specialist on Chinese strategic issues and a close 'confidant' to President Bush and National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice. These moves stand in shark contrast to the priorities of the Clinton Administration, which allowed the post to go vacant for many years.[10] In May of 2001, Condoleeza Rice took the unusual step of briefing Jaswant Singh on the US decision to announce plans for developing a ballistic missile defence (BMD) system. This was reciprocated by India's warm reaction to Bush's announcement. Afterwards, the US sent Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to visit India (alongside such allies as Japan and the Republic of Korea) to discuss this issue. It should be noted that this was the first time that the US was according India the status of an important partner in Asia on strategic issues.[11]

While the 9/11 attacks did see a new rapprochement between the US and Pakistan (which up until that point was close to being labeled a failed, rogue, or terrorist state), this did not come at the expense of Indo-US relations. In fact, the rapprochement between the two countries accelerated. The last of the sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan after the 1998 nuclear tests were eliminated. The number of visits between high-level ministers and departmental personnel has also significantly increased . In January of 2002, the fourth meeting of the US-India Counter-terrorism Working Group took place. Subsequently, cooperation on joint counter-terrorism operations was expanded and a new Joint Initiative on cyber-terrorism was launched.[12]

The defence and security relationship between the two sides has also undergone tremendous change. The first meeting of the DPG since the 1998 nuclear tests was held in December of

2001. The ambitious agenda has achieved significant results, including:

- combined naval patrols in the Strait of Malacca;
- resumption of defence trade with the Firefinder radar sale
- combined special forces airborne exercises in Agra;
- US-India Ballistic Missile Defense workshop in Colorado Springs;
- signing of a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) to facilitate cooperation in defence technology.[13]

One of the proposals for the joint naval patrols in the Straits of Malacca included escort operations by Indian navy ships for US supply ships every eight to ten days. The fact that the Straits of Malacca are a highly important sea line of communication (SLOC) that connects the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean makes this development particularly important from a trade security standpoint. Other naval developments include the renewal of the Malabar joint naval exercises. In September 2002, over 4,000 Indian and American naval personnel and nearly a dozen naval vessels were involved in their largest naval exercise (Malabar IV) in the Arabian Sea.[14] The October 2003 Malabar VI naval exercise featured an array of frigates, destroyers, and submarines, and for the first time involved deep-sea maneuvers with an American nuclear submarine.[15] Other exercises are planned for 2004.

While the US Firefinder artillery-locating radar deal (worth an estimated $146-million) is the largest military sale to India, other deals are at various stages of clearance.[16] Future possibilities include the sale of the P-3 Orion Maritime Patrol craft, defensive nuclear, biological, and chemical equipment, counter-terrorism equipment, and missile defence technology.

Lastly, the relationship between the special forces of both countries has shown a remarkable improvement in the post-9/11 security environment. In May of 2002, a bi-national exercise took place in Agra under the codenamed *Balance Iroquois*. This was followed by a joint mountain-warfare exercise in Alaska (codenamed *Geronimo Thrust*) in October, 2002 and an exercise in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir in September of 2003.[17]

Further areas for cooperation will include:

- specialized training programs and joint exercises to be carried out by the armed services of the two countries;
- development of a defence supply relationship, including through the Government-to-Government Foreign Military Sales program, that incorporates speedier approvals of export licences in the United States;
- resumption of technical cooperation in defence research, development and production.[18]

While little attention has been paid to this burgeoning relationship, it is likely that a *de facto* 'strategic partnership' has been quietly under development between the two countries

Non-Proliferation, Terrorism, and the 'China Factor'

As the above analysis makes clear, the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union opened a window of opportunity for the construction of an Indo-US partnership. The Indian alignment with the old Soviet Union was no longer an issue for Washington. There was also a growing acceptance that India's substantial post-1962 military expansion had led it to a hegemonic position in the subcontinent. Although still officially non-aligned, New Delhi had abandoned the defence strategy which had left India helpless before the Chinese invasion, and undertook a comprehensive program of military modernization with the aid of the US and the Soviet Union.[19] With the initial economic reforms of the early 1990s, India's economy began to grow at a rate of 6% a year. In the words of one defence analyst, this has important strategic implications for the Asia-Pacific:

> India will steadily acquire the economic, political, and strategic capabilities that set it along the path to great-power status, thus enabling it to break out of the limiting confines of the Indian subcontinent...and take its place as one of the major centers of power in Asia writ large.[20]

To be sure, the initially ambiguous policy of the Clinton Administration was largely due to the tensions caused by the US non-proliferation policy. The goal of non-proliferation conflicted with the Indian goal of ending 'nuclear apartheid', by either obtaining nuclear weapons or by holding the declared nuclear weapons states to their disarmament obligations under Article 6 of the NPT. Interestingly, it was only after the nuclear tests that the issue of non-proliferation became increasingly unimportant.

With the 9/11 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York, the two countries recognized their interest in stopping Islamic terrorists. The fact that India offered the use of its military bases - despite the American decision to use Pakistan as a base for operations in Afghanistan - was unprecedented. The issue of terrorism, which was always secondary in US national security priorities, instantly became a matter of vital interest to Washington. Given the presence of terrorist cells from Southwest Asia and the Middle East to Southeast Asia, the importance of India to US strategic calculations increased commensurately. This was reciprocated by India, which was already struggling with terrorism, not only from Pakistan-supported Kashmir separatists, but also from insurgencies in the Punjab and in the Northeast provinces. The events of 9/11 provided justification for India to decisively counter Pakistan's support of Kashmiri insurgents. An increasingly confident India was thus able to engage in the nuclear brinkmanship and coercive diplomacy with Pakistan following the latter's alleged complicity in the deadly attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2002.

Not to be overlooked, China should be viewed as an implicit factor in the growing closeness between the US and India. On the one hand, the rise of Chinese influence in Asia remains a constant source of concern for US policy-makers, and is likely the core reason for the continued maintenance of its bilateral alliances in East Asia. While there has been a brief up-turn in relations in the post-9/11 environment, persistent sources of disagreement (including US arms sales to Taiwan) are evident.[21]

The role that India could play vis-à-vis China—based on its size, resources, and growing power-projection capabilities—should not be underestimated. The possible 'Indian card' was

recently highlighted in a classified report by the US Defense Department entitled *Indo-US Military Relationship: Expectations and Perceptions*, which argued for the "strategic engagement" of India in order to counterbalance growing Chinese power, and perhaps play a key role in any future US containment of China.[22]

On the other hand, India has maintained a prolonged rivalry with its giant neighbor to the north. This began with the Chinese annexation of Tibet, which for the first time brought Chinese forces to the edge of Indian territory. This event contributed heavily to the 1962 war,[23] and led to the beginnings of a Sino-Indian rivalry among the Himalayan states of Nepal, Bhutan and, until the 1974 annexation, Sikkim.[24] The fact that China has developed an intimate relationship with Pakistan, providing it with significant military support, has only increased Indian apprehensions. Such apprehensions provide an important foundation for deepening Indo-US cooperation.

The 1990s has also witnessed a growing naval component to this Sino-Indian rivalry. India has been particularly concerned about Chinese intentions in the Bay of Bengal - specifically the reports that China is helping Myanmar set up three advanced naval bases for intelligence-gathering, as well as repair and refueling. Of greatest concern to New Delhi is a signals intelligence facility on the Coco Islands, just 30 nautical miles from the Indian naval base in the Andaman Islands.[25] In response, India has augmented its own presence through its naval facilities in the Nicobar and Andaman islands. This has included establishing a joint-service Andaman and Nicobar Command, which currently has 16 ships (and some air force and army personnel) stationed at Port Blair in the Andaman islands.[26] Additionally, India has successfully pursued a 'Look East' strategy towards Southeast Asia, consisting primarily of joint naval exercises with key Southeast Asian countries. Given the substantial maritime capabilities of US forces in East Asia, and the substantial and growing naval capabilities of key US allies in East Asia, it is likely that the naval dimensions of US-Indian relations will increase in the near future.

Conclusion

The growth of the Indo-US partnership, and the span of mutual interests between the two parties seems to have strengthened throughout the 1990s. This was not only due to the rise of Indian power, but also to the decreasing salience of American non-proliferation goals in South Asia. The post-9/11 security environment and growing concerns over China have only solidified this partnership. While this alignment will likely continue to develop into a *de facto* 'strategic partnership', it remains to be seen whether it will remain informal and based principally on anti-terrorism and naval cooperation.

Notes:

[1] See John W. Garver, *Protracted Conflict: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

[2] Quoted in Ravi Tomar, *India-US Relations in a Changing Environment*, Information and Research Services Research Report 20 (Australia: Department of the Parliamentary Library, June 25 2002), 6.

[3] See John W. Garver, *The China-India-US Strategic Triangle: Strategic Relations in the Post-Cold War Era*, NBR Analysis 13, 5 (Seattle, Washington: The National Bureau of Asian Research, October 2002), 16-20.

[4] During the 1980s, the need for Pakistani assistance in the Afghan proxy war led the US to maintain a blind eye on the Pakistani nuclear weapons program. See Samina Yasmeen, "Pakistan's Nuclear Tests: Domestic Debate and International Determinants," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 53, 1 (1999), 44.

[5] See Amit Gupta, "India-US Relations," *Issue Brief for Congress* (Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), September 3, 2002).

[6] Garver, *The China-India-US Triangle*, 26.

[7] See Bruce Riedal, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil summit at Blair House," Policy Paper Series, Center for the Advanced Study of India (2002), 1-18.

[8] Tomar, *India-US Relations*, 8.

[9] Garver, *The China-India-US Triangle*, 38.

[10] Ibid., 37.

[11] For this observation, see Venu Rajamony, "India-China-U.S. Triangle: A 'Soft' Balance of Power System in the Making," Center for Strategic and International Studies (March 15, 2002), at http://www.csis.org/saprog/venu.pdf.

[12] Gupta, "India-US Relations," 1.

[13] Joint Statement of India-US Defense Policy Group, 23 May, 2002, at http://www.meadev.nic.in/foreign/jt-stmt-indo-us.htm

[14] Chidanand Rajghatta, "India, US to hold joint naval exercises," *The Times of India Online* (18 September, 2002), at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/cms.dll/xml/comp/articleshow?art_id=22583645

[15] "India, US to hold joint naval exercise in the Arabian Sea," *Sify News* (15 September, 2003), at http://sify.com/news/othernews/fullstory.php?id=13251957.

[16] The US has received applications for 81 items on the Munitions List, of which none have been denied. Of these, 20 have been approved. Aside from the eight AN/TPQ-37 Weapon Locating Radars, other items include components for satellite launchers, helicopter spare parts, and micro-detonators. Other deals in various stages of Congressional clearance include engine and avionic components for India's Light Combat Aircraft, undersea remotely operating vehicles, submarine combat systems, and P-3C maritime reconnaissance aircraft.

[17] "India-US begin joint wargames," *Reuters*, 26 September, 2002, at http://www.dawn.com/2002/09/27/top18.htm and "Indo-US joint exercises begin in Ladakh," *Asia News International* (9 September, 2003), at http://in.news.yahoo.com/030909/139/27o4v.html.

[18] Joint Statement of India-US Defense Policy Group, 23 May, 2002.

[19] A. Z. Hilali, "India's Strategic Thinking and Its National Security Policy," *Asian Survey*, XLI, 5 (September-October 2001), 739.

[20] Ashley Tellis, "South Asia," in *Strategic Asia 2001-2002*, eds. Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), 238.

[21] See Aaron L. Friedberg, "11 September and the Future of Sino-American Relations," *Survival*, 44, 1 (Spring 2002), 33-50.

[22] Conn Hallinan, "US and India: A dangerous alliance," *Asia Times* (May 9, 2003), at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/EE09Df03.html.

[23] For this argument, see Dawa Norbu, "Tibet in Sino-Indian Relations," *Asian Survey*, 37, 11 (November 1997), 1078-1095.

[24] The annexation of Tibet led India to pursue of two-pronged policy of appeasing Chinese concerns (with the 1954 Treaty and the *Pancheel* principles) and strengthening its security relationships with the Himalayan states. With the 1962 war, India began emphasizing military modernization. See J. Mohan Malik, "China-India Relations in the Post-Soviet Era: The Continuing Rivalry," *The China Quarterly* (1995), 317-355.

[25] While the true extent and motive for these naval developments are unknown, possibilities include: to monitor Indian missile launches conducted between Orissa and the Andamans; maritime reconnaissance or communication and naval facilities for Chinese naval vessels; a listening post; a deep-water port for Chinese nuclear submarines. Aside from the naval facilities, China's growing involvement in Myanmar can also be seen in its military aid to the Myanmar army (*Tatmadaw*), aid that totalled $1.5-billion and allowed the army to expand from 200,000 to 400,000 (with a planned expansion to 500,000). See J. Mohan Malik, "Sino-Indian Rivalry in Myanmar: Implications for Regional Security," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 16, 2 (September 1994), 137-156 and J. Mohan Malik "Myanmar's Role in Regional Security: Pawn or Pivot?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 19, 1 (June 1997), 52-73.

[27] See Prakash Nanda, "Strategic Signficance of the Andamans," *Bharat Rakshak Monitor*, 5, 3 (November-December 2002), at http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MONITOR/ISSUE5-3/nanda.html.

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